

The Hair Issue: Political Attitude and Self-Esteem as Determinants of Hairstyle Choices Among African American Women

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This paper presents a two-fold study. First, the study focuses on whether self-esteem influences hairstyles among African American women. Second, it focuses on whether hairstyles are an indicator of political beliefs. A survey questionnaire was distributed to 100 African American women in order to analyze their attitudes regarding hair in relation to political beliefs and self-esteem. Using Pearson's Correlation Coefficient and OLS Regression, the findings suggest that those with high self-esteem are more likely to wear their hair in a natural state. Therefore, African American women with high self esteem are more likely to wear their hair in a natural state, while African American women with low self-esteem are more likely to process their hair. Meanwhile, political attitudes do not affect hairstyle preferences. Finally, more educated women prefer to wear processed hair compared to less educated women, who prefer to wear their hair natural.

INTRODUCTION

¹Black hair care has always managed to fit into the budget and, while some may think it would be the first to go, studies have shown that despite the present economic state of America and the price spike at most salons Black women are

still flocking to their hairdressers to keep up with routine maintenance. Some do it for the look; some do it for social reasons, and others do it for professional reasons. Right or wrong, hair does matter. Next to skin color, hair is truly the most visible stereotype of being a black woman. Physically, socially, economically, and stylistically black women's hair is, not just hair. It evokes a serious debate in the Black community. Hair can be seen as an indicator of gender, social class, sexual orientation,

¹ Tajia Joseph is a graduate student at the Department of Sociology. This research paper was originally submitted to SOC 410 Advance Statistics, taught by Professor Hyojoung Kim in Summer 2009.

political views, religion, and age. The focus of this study is to determine if self-esteem influences hairstyles. The other focus of this study is whether or not those hairstyles are an indicator of political beliefs.

Throughout history, emulating White hairstyles, particularly straight hair, signified many things in the Black community. First, straight hair was associated with free-person status during times of slavery. Light-skinned runaway slaves “tried to pass themselves off as free, hoping their European features would be enough to convince bounty hunters that they belonged to that privileged class. “Emulating Whiteness offered a certain amount of protection. Second, lighter-skinned and straight-haired slaves worked inside the plantation houses performing less backbreaking labor than the slaves relegated to the fields. The practice of straightening was viewed as a pitiful attempt to emulate Whites and equated hair straightening with self-hatred and shame” (Bellinger, 2007).

With regard to the issue of hair, Garvey proclaimed, “Don’t remove the kinks from your hair! Remove them from your brain!” Black women choose to wear their hair in a natural state in order to embrace their culture. Black women are less concerned with weight and more concerned with the appearance of their hair. Black women’s hair is an indicator of self-satisfaction and ethnic pride. Some African American women have considered changing their hair from its natural state to be an act of self-hatred. African American women say they no longer follow historical norms of wanting to appear White and choose to not change their hair based on racial

pride.

In the 1960s, hair was a political statement and a symbol of the Black power movement. Hair was used as a resistant strategy against White beauty standards. Natural hair was considered radical because it gave off the message that I do not desire to conform. However, in the 1990s afro hairstyles became a symbol of delinquency for males and lower status for females. It was no coincidence that last year’s infamous New Yorker cover that depicted the Obamas as White House terrorists featured Michelle with a huge Afro. Barack’s turban was a bad joke; Michelle’s big hair was a legitimate threat that could materialize at any moment. The afro challenges the hegemonic White standard of beauty through Black beauty liberation. As Michelle Obama, a black woman who has become the first lady, undergoes scrutiny, there is no better time than now to examine how black women are frequently prejudged and mischaracterized.

One of the variables of examination is self-esteem levels. Social Comparison theory argues there is a drive within individuals to look to outside images in order to evaluate their own opinions and abilities. These images are usually in comparison to other people. People look to the images portrayed by others to be obtainable, realistic, and, subsequently, to make comparisons among themselves, others, and the idealized images. The exposure to Caucasian models in advertisements affects the self-esteem of African American women. “Exposure to idealized advertising images creates self-doubt and dissatisfaction for women of color. They actively or passively engage

in social comparison” (Frisby 2004).

Younger African American women say they no longer follow historical norms of wanting to appear White and choose to not change their hair based on racial pride taught to them by their mothers. During slavery, slave children were told “to refer to their hair as wool and encouraged not to like their own hair” (Bellinger 2007). Slaves were regularly told to cover their hair with rags or scarves so they could look “presentable” for company. The natural look did not sit well with them at all during that time. African American hair was so different that some scholars actually said they were from a different species because the hair was like wool, not like silk.

Afrocentrists believe that Africans exhibit a range of types and physical characteristics, and such elements as wavy hair or aquiline facial features are part of a continuum of African types that do not depend on admixture with Caucasian groups. It is concerned with racism, racial subordination, and discrimination. Afrocentric theory examines the effect of the White standard of beauty upon African American women. It challenges the hegemonic White standard of beauty through Black beauty liberation. This theory argues that Black is beautiful in all the varying ways. It also calls into question the standards of beauty, which change over time depending on the ruling class. “Beauty is subject to the hegemonic standards of the ruling class” (Patton 2006). There are “unrealistic expectations of beauty and hairstyle that reify the divisions that exist between African American and Euro American women” (Patton 2006). The Afrocentric

theory advocates that African Americans distance themselves from the views of mainstream society, which in this case is the White culture.

Social identity theory is concerned both with the psychological and sociological aspects of group behavior. Social identity theory is concerned with when and why individuals identify with and behave as part of social groups, adopting shared attitudes to outsiders. Collective identity refers to the shared definition of a group that derives from its members’ common interests, experiences, and solidarities. Some argue that group identity creates a mentality of victimization, cultivates exclusion from and hostility toward main-stream society, and encourages separatism and divisiveness. However, there is “little evidence that black identity consists of oppositional attitudes towards whites” (Herring, Jankowski and Brown 1999).

Hairstyles serve as important cultural artifacts because they are simultaneously public (visible to everyone), private (biologically linked to the body), and malleable to suit cultural and personal preferences (Weitz, 2001). Hairstyle would be an indicator of group identity. Wearing natural hair would indicate an identity with black culture, while processed hair would indicate an identity with white culture. Most professional black women straighten their hair. Ethnic hair can be misinterpreted as defiant or militant. Hair is central to the resistance of oppression. “The black body has been a site of political struggle since the antebellum period and the body of the diasporic settler has been and remains a key site of political contestation” (Dash 2006).

The first hypothesis explores if there is a correlation between self-esteem and hairstyle. The hypothesis is: the more self-esteem African American women have the more natural their hairstyle will be. Self-esteem can have an effect on hairstyle choices. Therefore, we predict that high self-esteem leads African American women to wear their hair in its natural state more often. For the second hypothesis, the relationship between political attitudes and hairstyles are examined. The hypothesis states that the more natural hairstyle an African American wears, the more likely she is to have a liberal viewpoint in politics. According to this hypothesis, hairstyle is an indicator of political attitude. The prediction is that hairstyle does indicate political beliefs and the more natural the hairstyle, the more radical the person will be.

DATA AND MEASUREMENT OF VARIABLES

For my research, the target population was African American women. The study analyzes attitudes based on hair. A survey will be used to collect the data necessary for the study. The study will take place during the summer in the month of July 2009. The participants will be African American women residing in the United States. In order to get the data required for meaningful results, participants need not be residents of California.

Dependent Variables

In this study, hairstyle choices depend on the political beliefs or self-esteem of African American women. Therefore,

African American women are surveyed about the following two types of hairstyle choices:

Natural hair can be defined as not having been unaltered by chemicals and, therefore, does not have a straight look but is tightly coiled in appearance or braided.

Processed hair is any hair that has been chemically altered or straightened by heating tools.

In order to assess the predominant hairstyle choices of African American females, the participants were asked to self identify their hairstyle preference. They were asked three questions about hair maintenance. They were asked "How often do you press/straighten your hair?" "How often they perm (or relax) their hair?" "How often they wear their hair in its natural state?" Each of the questions had the following response categories: always (daily), frequently (weekly), sometimes (monthly), rarely (yearly), and never. For each question, values from 0 to 4 are used in such a way that higher values indicate more preference for natural hair styles. The three questions are added together to create an index. This index range is between 0 and 12, with higher values indicating more preference for natural hair styles.

Independent Variables

Self Esteem reflects a person's overall evaluation or appraisal of his or her own worth. Since we cannot depend on the respondent's assessment of their self-esteem, the Rosenberg test of self-esteem is adjusted and used to determine levels of esteem. The participants were asked to rate themselves on several

aspects concerning self-esteem. The response categories, taken directly from the Rosenberg scale, ranged from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Each of the questions had the following response categories: strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree. For each question, values from 0 to 3 are used in such a way that higher values indicate higher level of self-esteem.

Political Attitude, for the purpose of this study, political attitude is measured by ideas and beliefs that align on a continuum from liberal to conservative. I asked questions on 6 major political issues (Gun control, abortion, gay marriage, death penalty, war and welfare) to assess political viewpoint. Using the same scale as above, the response categories ranged from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Each of the questions had the following response categories: strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree. For each question, values from 0 to 3 are used in such a way that higher values indicate democratic attitudes and lower values would indicate conservative attitudes.

Control Variables

In determining the affect of self-esteem and political attitude on hairstyle, other factors may influence findings and affect the dependent variable. A possible variable that may affect the findings is employment.

Employment: One's employment status may influence hairstyle choices as well. If a person already has a steady job, they may be more willing to wear their hair in a natural style or coerced into changing it. If someone is looking

for employment in corporate America, they may feel more pressure to "look" the part and process their hair. On the other hand, they are free of constrictions and can do as they wish. African American women are well aware of the stigma related to natural hair. It's about how American society and culture feels about what black people do with their hair. Again, natural hair is still viewed as radical and not willing to conform. No employer wants an employee that may be radical enough to cause the company problems or repel clientele.

THE FINDINGS

A survey was distributed to female African American participants. I asked each respondent to please answer each of the questions as accurately as possible and return it to the envelope with other completed surveys. To insure that they were anonymous, I folded all surveys and let the respondent place them into my envelope.

Univariate Statistics

In total, there were 100 participants. Table 1 reports the univariate distribution of the respondents on each of the variables used in the analysis. Of the participants, 55% of the women say they wear their hair natural at all times. The age of the women in this survey concentrated in one category. The age range of 25-32 comprised of 68% of the participants. Only 13% of the respondents were unemployed. Eighty-seven women were working either part-time or full time jobs. The independent variable of education was the most evenly distributed. The high school diploma

category had eight women, and only 2 women earned higher than a Bachelor's degree. Ninety two percent of the women had at least some college in their lifetime. Personal income had 64% of women in the category of \$35,001-\$50,000 earnings. Only 5% of women said they did not agree with having a positive self-attitude. No matter what the hairstyle preference, most women still held a positive self-attitude.

Pearson's Correlation Analysis

Table 2 reports Pearson's correlation coefficients among the variables in the analysis. Pearson's correlation coefficient between current hairstyle and self-esteem is negative and statistically significant at least at the 0.05 level. This means that as hairstyle decreases from zero to one, or processed to natural, self-esteem increases from low to high. Therefore, self-esteem does affect hairstyle preference in African American women. Apparently, political attitudes also influence hairstyle preference among African American women. Pearson's correlation coefficient for these two variables was positive and statistically significant at the 0.05 level. These two variables are positively correlated. This means that as political attitudes increase from low scores (conservative) to high score (liberal), hairstyle preference increases from processed to natural.

There was also a negative correlation found between education and hairstyle preference. Pearson's correlation coefficient for these two variables is negative and statistically significant at the 0.05 level. This means that as education increases, hairstyle preference

decreases from natural hairstyles to processed hairstyles. In other words, more educated people are more likely to process their hair and less likely to wear their hair natural.

Another statistic was tested for the variable employment and hairstyle preference. The Pearson's correlation coefficient between these two variables is statistically insignificant at the 0.05 level. This means that employment status, whether you are employed or not, does not affect hairstyle preference. As it turns out, marital status, age, and income are not significantly correlated. Pearson's correlation coefficient for all of the above variables is statistically insignificant at the 0.05 level. This means that the variables above have no individual effect on hairstyle preference.

Table 1. Survey Questions and Descriptive Statistics of Variables Used in the Analysis

Variable	Survey Questions Used	Response Categories	Frequency		Mean	S. D.
Age	What is your current age?	0 = under 18 1 = 8-24 2 = 25-32 3 = 33-45 4 = 46+	0 4 68 6 22	 4% 68% 6% 22%	2.46	.881
Employment	What is your current occupation?	0 = unemployed 1 = employed	13 87	13% 87%	0.87	.338
Marital Status	Please choose the one choice for each question that applies to you	0 = single 1 = In a relationship 2 = Married 3 = Divorced 4 = Widowed	41 40 14 5 0	41% 40% 14% 5% 0%	0.83	.853
Education	Please choose the one choice for each question that applies to you	0 = H.S diploma 1 = some college 2 = A.A degree 3 = B.A 4 = M.A 5 = PH.D	8 31 23 36 2 0	8% 31% 23% 36% 2% 0%	2.93	1.037
Personal Income	Please choose the one choice for each question that applies to you	0 = 0-\$10,000 1 = \$10,001-\$20,000 2 = \$20,001-\$35,000 3 = \$35,001-\$50,000 4 = \$50,001-\$75,000 5 = over \$75,000	10 16 64 10 0	10% 16% 64% 10% 0%	2.74	.774

Table 2. Pearson's Correlation Coefficients of Variables Used in the Analysis¹⁾

	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Hairstyle Preference	.005	.052	.046	<i>-.212</i>	-.008	<i>.452</i>	<i>.230</i>
2. Age		-.102	<i>.374</i>	-.185	<i>-.371</i>	<i>-.262</i>	-.117
3. Employment			-.112	.060	.024	.107	.001
4. Marital Status				<i>.272</i>	<i>.208</i>	-.026	.004
5. Education					<i>.644</i>	.160	.059
6 Income						<i>.209</i>	.089
7. Self-Esteem							<i>.525</i>
8. Political Attitude							

Statistical significance at 0.05 level is indicated by bolded italics

Multivariate Continuous Regression Analysis

The outcomes of bivariate associations may be spurious due to the effects of other variables that may affect both the dependent variable (hairstyle preference) and the key independent variables (self esteem and political attitude) simultaneously. How can we determine the genuine effect of an independent variable? The unique effect of the key independent variables on the dependent variable without regard to other independent variables must be assessed. In other words, I must control for the effects of other variables. In order to control the effects of other variables on hairstyle preferences of African American women, I now analyze the data using multivariate regression techniques. Please note that our hairstyle preference variable (the dependent variable) is continuous, consisting of different categories of preferences and choices of hairstyles. Originally, my dependent variable had five outcome categories: always, frequently, sometimes, rarely, and never. I created a new index out of three questions. The three questions distinguished hairstyle maintenance questions and were combined to determine preference overall. With the new index, 12 categories were differentiated. A person could have a score anywhere from 0 -12. Consequently, I use OLS regression analysis to separate out the effects of self-esteem and political attitude net of the effects of other control variables.

The degree to which two or more independent variables are related to the dependent variable is expressed in the

adjusted R square, which explains the variance in the dependent variable. R square ranges from 0 to 1. The adjusted R square in my model summary was 0.263. This shows that the model successfully explains 26% of the total variation present in the dependent variable. This outcome indicates the explanatory power of our model in explaining who is more likely to have and prefer wearing natural hair.

Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) consists of calculations that provide information about levels of variability within a regression model and form a basis for tests of significance. The F test is a global hypothesis test, which tests significance. The F test for the independent variables in relation to the dependent variable is statistically significant; indicating that least one of the independent variables is significantly affecting the dependent variable of hairstyle preference.

The OLS regression analysis also tests whether a given individual independent variable has a significant effect on the dependent variable. Statistical insignificance here indicates that the corresponding independent variable has no significant effect in determining the outcome of hairstyle preference. Two variables are statistically significant at least at the 0.05 level (one-tailed). They are self-esteem and education. Other variables are statistically insignificant even at 0.05 level, thus, indicating that they have no *direct* or *independent* effect in determining the outcomes of hairstyle preference, net of the effects of other independent variables.

Table 3. OLS Regression Coefficients of Hairstyle Preference on Independent Variables

Independent Variables	Coefficient	(s.e.)
Political Attitude	-.049	(.427)
Self-Esteem	2.829	(.648)**
Age	.227	(.301)
Employment	.256	(.639)
Marital Status	.296	(.312)
Education	-.935	(.301)**
Income	.451	(.432)
F-Test	5.412**	
Adjusted R-squared	.263	

* $p < 0.05$ level of significance; ** $p < 0.01$ level of significance

The regression coefficient of self-esteem is positive and statistically significant at the 0.05 level, net of all the other variables in the model. The positive regression coefficient means that self-esteem has a positive effect on hairstyle preference. This means that those with high self-esteem are more likely to wear their hair in a natural state. This supports the hypothesis that high self-esteem leads African American women to wear their hair in its natural state more often.

The regression coefficient of education is negative and statistically significant at the 0.05 level, net of all other variables in the model. The test reveals that education has a significant negative effect on hairstyle preference. This means that more educated women prefer to wear processed hair while less educated women prefer to wear their hair natural.

Interestingly, political attitude did not have a significant effect on hairstyle preference. The regression coefficient of political attitude is statistically insignificant at 0.05 level, net of other variables in the model. According to Pearson's correlation coefficient test, political attitude was significant. However, in the regression analysis, political attitude was found to be insignificant. This means that the relation reported in Pearson's test was spurious. It turns out that political attitudes do not affect hairstyle preferences.

For all other independent variables, the regression coefficient is statistically insignificant at 0.05 level, net of the other variables in the model. Therefore, the variables age, employment, marital status, and income have no

significant effect on hairstyle preference, net of the other variables in the model.

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSION

The findings above show that there is a high correlation between self esteem and hairstyle. The hypothesis stated that "the more self esteem African American women have the more natural their hairstyle will be." Based on my findings, my hypothesis has been accepted. According to findings, self-esteem does affect hairstyle preferences. High self-esteem leads African American women to wear their hair in its natural state more often. These findings may indicate that there is a positive shift in ethnic pride, self-satisfaction, and social identity. Natural, unprocessed hair is the essence of African American pride. Women with high levels of self-esteem are choosing to not follow historical norms of wanting to appear White, even though they are constantly exposed to idealized images of beauty through the media. African American women with high levels of self-esteem seem to share the Afrocentric perspective that Black is beautiful in all its varying ways.

However, the fact that African American women still process their hair suggests that they are still judged by their hair composition. Low self esteem causes African American women to seek dominant images that are valued and accepted in American society. Therefore, African American women with low self-esteem are still trying to emulate White hairstyles. High self-esteem leads African American women to embrace their natural hair. They are the women that are secure enough to decline the hegemonic standard of beauty. These

women with high self-esteem are comfortable in their own skin. They embrace their natural hair and are not afraid to have a more afrocentric image.

The second hypothesis on political attitudes and hairstyles was not supported. The hypothesis stated that the more natural hairstyle an African American woman wears, the more likely she is to have a liberal viewpoint in politics. The rejection of the second hypothesis disrupts the classic image of the militant or radical, afro-wearing women and suggests that African American women are aligning themselves with mainstream societal concerns. Hairstyle is a personal choice, not a political indicator. It also challenges the notion of “the more natural, the more dangerous,” an image of African American women that has been popular since the Black Panther movement. Today, African American women can embrace their natural hair without being directly tied into radical movements and thought. The natural hair preference has more to do with taking on the African American culture and accepting self than with rejecting mainstream society. Today, these two things are not one in the same.

There were also interesting findings on the variable education. I found that more educated people are more likely to process their hair and less likely to wear their hair natural. As African American women enter White dominated markets they may feel more pressure to conform to institutional norms. Wearing an Afro or braids might hurt more than help their prospects in corporate America. White executives are the majority population throughout corporate America. Therefore, standards

of dress and acceptable hairstyles have mirrored white styles. The assumption is that if you're a dark woman with nappy hair, you can't be a woman in the board room, running the company. Educated African American women seek approval from colleagues and other professionals. Entering the professional world means shedding anything that may intimidate future employers and/ or clientele from hiring them.

Hair does not mean the same thing to all women as it does to black women. The great hair obsession is driven by the painful need of many African-Americans to conform to the dominant values of American society. For black women, hair is a physical indicator of the ways in which they are different. Part of female beauty has always included long flowing locks, and for black women who have gravity-defying hair, that refuses to match the standard appearance; this can be a problem. In a culture that teaches that anything black or associated with blackness is negative. Publicly wearing your hair natural for African-American women is to embrace blackness as a positive. African American women must be secure within themselves in order to accept their natural hair. Exposure to images of acceptable beauty can negatively affect Black women's self-confidence, which causes them to indulge in image altering products and behaviors. This is why women with high self-esteem are more likely to wear their hair in its natural state and women with low self-esteem are more likely to process their hair. Wearing your hair natural is a way for Black women to show love for themselves and their ethnicity.

There are some limitations to consider in this study. Most women were chosen from the Los Angeles area. Self esteem issues may be more prevalent in the Los Angeles area where Hollywood aspirations and celebrity comparison are high. Another limitation could be the Hawthorn effect. The mere fact that I was present when submitting the surveys may have altered participant responses. The way I presented the survey, my demeanor, or the way the questions were structured may have affected the findings. Another factor to consider is the social desirability involved. Although the survey was anonymous, respondents may have answered certain questions in a way that presented them in good light.

Future research may need to administer the survey in different states to compare results. Also, future research might examine employment types. To distinguish between full time and part time occupations. Also, to compare employment types and positions held by African American women. This may reveal interesting patterns among working African American women.

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